

THE EIGHTEENTH MASSACHUSETTS REGIMENT.

A DISCOURSE

IN COMMEMORATION OF

WASHINGTON'S BIRTHDAY,

DELIVERED IN

FALLS CHURCH, FAIRFAX CO., VA.,

ON SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 23, 1862.

BY REV. B. F. DE COSTA,
CHAPLAIN OF THE EIGHTEENTH MASSACHUSETTS REGIMENT

IN PACE BELL O PRIMUS.

Charlestown, Mass.

1862.

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N o t e .

On the recurrence of the Anniversary of Washington's Birthday, the Eighteenth Massachusetts Regiment was stationed at Camp Barnes, Hall's Hill, Fairfax County, Va. The propriety of holding some commemorative service was suggested to the Regiment, and Falls Church, two miles distant from Camp, was selected as the most appropriate place for the celebration. The following discourse was prepared for the occasion, and though composed amid the tumults of a camp is now made public in accordance with an expressed wish, as a tribute of respect to the memory of Washington.

The Reader may perhaps be interested to learn that Falls Church was built at a very early date, of brick brought from England. Without tower or spire, the soldier as he approaches on the Leesburg Turnpike is unable to discern it at a distance, but comes upon it suddenly, and finds it embosomed among the lofty trees in the surrounding Churchyard. Within are no ecclesiastical adornments, no mediaeval tracery and painted windows, no dim religious light, and no Gothic arch rising grandly to the ceiling, chaunting its perpetual *Sursum Corda*. And yet this simple, unpretending structure, which has no architectural beauty to recommend it to the Artist, is an object of great interest. For several years Washington was a Vestryman of the Parish, and on Sundays he was accustomed to ride from Mount Vernon, to attend the services, which were conducted according to the Ritual of the Protestant Episcopal Church. This venerable edifice has been sadly neglected and profaned during the present war, and has fallen successively into the hands of the rebel and Union troops. Representatives of both parties, the victims of a wicked ambition, now peacefully slumber side by side in the Churchyard, mourned at desolate firesides from the Carolinas to the shores of the Michigan.

CAMP BARNES, HALL'S HILL, V. A., Feb. 24th, 1862.

1862

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DISCOURSE.

"WHO BEING DEAD YET SPEAKETH." — Heb. 11: 4.

EVERY life repeats itself. No power is lost in nature. Change, not annihilation, is the law. In mechanics action and reaction are equal. A pebble cast into the ocean sends a thrill into all its secret fountains. The faintest whisper travels around the world, and causes a vibration through the entire universe. The same law perpetuates the moral and intellectual forces. The martyrs and confessors and warriors of ancient times all live to-day. The lives of the lofty and the lowly alike possess this all-pervading influence, and share whatever of glory or shame may be bound up in the decree of God. The humblest of the sleepers lying yonder are remembered by those with whom they were formerly accustomed to mingle; and though the pyramids of Egypt may eventually crumble back to dust, their influence will endure among men when the noblest monuments have forever passed away.

The influence of the departed is manifested in different ways and in various degrees. Some affect the

world in a manner that is unobtrusive and scarcely observable. Others are felt occasionally. When some cycle is finished, their words, uttered long ages ago, return to us and strike like "historic hailstones," and their memories blaze for a time with cometic splendor. There are still others, who instead of exerting an occasional or periodic influence, rule us constantly with a firm and unalterable sway.

Such is the Memory of Washington.

Other names have been handed down in connection with the annals of our beloved country—honored and illustrious names—but the name of Washington stands preeminent among them all, and to-day it rises involuntarily upon our lips. He lives in every heart, inspires our national life, and speaks in every institution.

The Character of Washington is well understood by the American people, and its elements have often been expressed in language that will stand as classic so long as the English tongue is spoken. His claim to genuine greatness and immeasurable superiority over the heroes of his time has been made and gladly allowed. I will therefore attempt no eulogy or fresh analysis of his character, and will only speak of Washington so far as may be necessary to subserve my present purpose, which is to —

ILLUSTRATE OUR DUTY AND RESPONSIBILITY IN
THIS DARK AND CALAMITOUS HOUR OF NATIONAL TRIAL.

I. These are times which call, not for theories or speculations, or sounding platitudes, but for *action*. Every other consideration dwindles into insignificance compared with the one all-absorbing theme of

present duty, and all discussion should therefore be confined simply to consider in what that duty consists and how it should be performed.

A few months ago we were quietly pursuing our avocations in our respective homes among the hills of New England. To-day we stand upon the soil of Virginia with arms in our hands, ready to engage in deadly conflict with those who but lately were uniting with us in offices of devotion and patriotism, and apparently rejoicing with us in the prosperity of our common country. A sad and strange spectacle indeed! Throughout the length and breadth of this vast Republic, the hosts are assembling and girding themselves for the fearful struggle. But why this terrible conflict, and why are we here to-day? Not assuredly for any personal advantage. We have come inspired by no dream of ambition and with no hopes of golden conquest. We are here not to devastate and pillage, not to outrage the unoffending, or to shed innocent blood; and if in one hand we bear the sword, in the other we bear the sacred olive branch.

The people of the South have risen in rebellion against the regularly constituted authorities of the land, and we are now engaged in a stupendous struggle for its suppression. Of the causes which led to this fearful outbreak it is unnecessary to say but a word. Disappointed in their schemes to rule the nation with a rod of iron; foiled in their efforts to transform the charter of our liberties into the patents of a slave propaganda; and humiliated and disgraced in the eyes of their constituents, the ambitious and unscrupulous leaders of the South resolved on one

grand effort to win back their lost greatness. How far we may be deemed responsible, I will not undertake to say, nor will I inquire in what respect this great calamity may be considered a visitation of God, permitted as a chastisement for our sins as a nation. That the people of both the North and the South had prepared the way for the operations of these wicked conspirators, cannot be denied. By our forgetfulness of God, by our abuse of our freedom, and by the contempt for authority, which in past years has engendered many a scene of violence in the various sections of our country, we had been gradually verging towards a lax condition of public sentiment in every respect favorable to the growth of anarchy and rebellion. In our semi-barbarous eagerness to enjoy the fruits of liberty, we had well nigh lain the axe at the root of the fair and beautious tree which in the Providence of God was planted in this Western World for the healing of the nations. But that is past, and let the dead bury the dead — but happy will it be for us, as a people, if we learn a lesson of wisdom, and rise from the earth to which we are now bowed down, the better prepared to continue the struggle, having, like fabled Antæus, renewed our strength by the blessed communication. We are now in the midst of the rebellion ; therefore, waiving all other considerations, it becomes us to study our duties in this great crisis with calmness and deliberation, to remember whither our course may tend, and the sacrifices to which it may lead us.

The language of one of Washington's General Orders, issued at the beginning of a new campaign,

seems peculiarly appropriate at this time, when the winter, which has been a period of inactivity, has about passed away, and the paths to the interior are beginning to open. He says—

As the season is now fast approaching when every man must be drawn into the field of action, it is highly important that he should prepare his mind, as well as everything necessary for it. It is a noble cause we are engaged in ; it is the cause of virtue and mankind ; every temporal advantage and comfort to us and our posterity depends upon the vigor of our exertions ; in short, freedom or slavery must be the result of our conduct ; there can, therefore, be no greater inducement to men to behave well.

From the noble course suggested here, let nothing turn us aside. The eyes of not only the whole country, but the whole world, are upon us. They look to see if we are faithful to the high trust imposed upon us, and in the expectation that we shall achieve some action that will be worthy of so exalted a cause as that of the Constitution and the Union ; of order and freedom and good government. This devotion is demanded of the highest and the lowest. Indifference or neglect of the public interest will be deemed wholly inexcusable wherever it may be found. The times require vigorous, patient, and persistent action. Let the fires of patriotism, therefore, be kept alive upon the altar of the heart. Let no injury, either real or fancied, cause us to deviate for one moment from the line of duty, or lead us to look coldly upon the interests of our country ; for the moment a soldier allows any private animosity to interfere with the discharge of his obligations, he sinks all that renders his service praiseworthy and glorious, and stands

before his comrades a confessed mercenary. His country may neglect him, overlook his merits and ignore his claims, but *he* can never neglect his country. To assume that the debt we owe the country is cancelled, when the country fails to extend towards us that consideration supposed to be due, is a gross fallacy, and one which we should expect to find entertained only by the traitor. The true soldier should rise to the noble philosophy which is inculcated by the Apostle Paul, when he says—

For what glory is it, if when ye be buffeted for your faults, ye shall take it patiently? But, if, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God.

It was the practical embodiment of this elevated sentiment which invests the life of Washington with its halo of beauty. His was a soul not easily disturbed by any sordid or common consideration. Behold him year after year patiently treading the path of duty and patriotism, unmindful of the obloquy and reproach heaped upon him by his enemies. See him, whether in the camp or cabinet, adhering steadily to his country's cause, regardless of the ingratitude of Congress and the jealousy of his officers. With a courage that no danger could appal, with a policy that his subordinates were unable to fathom, and with a perseverance which no disaster could discourage, he held to his sublime course, conscious of his own rectitude, and leaving his motives to be vindicated by the certain results. Let us all to-day be incited to follow his glorious example, and seek to discharge our obli-

gations in the same disinterested spirit, remembering that duty thus performed brings its own reward.

This, it seems to me, is a fitting occasion to renew our vows of fidelity and allegiance to the country and its cause. We are assembled, not only upon the soil of his native State, and within a short distance of the spot where the ashes of Washington repose, but we have come together in the Church where for years he was a constant and devout worshipper. These sacred walls, now scarred by vandalism, are doubly consecrated. Hither he came, Sunday after Sunday, from his home at Mount Vernon, to unite with the Parish, of which he was a Vestryman, in the worship and praise of Almighty God. The beautiful and expressive forms of prayer that we have repeated to-day, were the forms to which he was unalterably attached, and through them he ever sought to express the desires and convictions of his heart. Here he reverently inquired what the Lord would have him do ; here he listened to the truth as declared by the chosen servants of God ; and at this Altar he was accustomed to kneel and receive the great distinguishing Sacrament of the Christian Faith ; while in the Church-yard he would afterwards linger and commune with his own deep thoughts. This simple, unpretending House of God, which has so often witnessed his devotions, is redolent with the fragrance of his memory ; I am right, therefore, when I say that this is a fit time and place to pledge ourselves anew to the cause of our country.

II. But I must not rest here. There are other duties and obligations binding upon us, besides those claim-

ed by our country in this hour of danger and peril. There are the duties which we owe more especially to ourselves and to our God. To inculcate the former and neglect the latter would be inexcusable. It would also be unwise, since the more faithfully men attend to their moral and religious duties, the more conscientious will be their devotion to the country and its welfare. Other things being equal, the man who has enrolled himself under the banner of God as a soldier and servant of Christ, will prove the bravest and most efficient on the field of battle, or wherever else the lofty and commanding qualities may be needed.

It is indeed strange that any one should have supposed the contrary, or that so sagacious an observer as the Duke of Wellington should have made the remark attributed to him, that “a man of refined Christian sensibilities is totally unfit for the profession of a soldier.”

The most invincible corps that ever grappled with a foe was that memorable Ironsides Regiment, in which every man was a Christian man, and who charged at Naseby and Marston Moor, chanting for a battle song the inspiring Psalms of David. The King’s troops, the Cavaliers, were inspired by the lofty sentiment of *honor*; and, said Cromwell, “to cope with these we must have men of *religion*.” And when the hour for action came, the men of his choice, having no fear but the fear of God before their eyes, rushed impetuously into the fight at Wineby. The proud Cavaliers gave for their watchword “*Cavendish*”; but the soldiers of the Commonwealth, giving

the simple word "*Religion*," threw themselves upon the ranks of the foe and swept them away like chaff before the wind. The same principle was exhibited by Washington, who took great pains to caution his officers against the enlistment of men of low moral principle, and especially those abandoned vagabonds to whom all services were alike. Such wield a "base and boisterous sword," nor do they "breathe deliberate valor," since they fail to endure as seeing Him who is invisible. A keen sense of honor and an exalted patriotism will go far to sustain a man in the hour of danger. But in this case we need to appeal to the strongest element in human nature. Such I conceive religion to be. It underlies every other sentiment, just as in geology the primary rocks stretch out beneath all the other strata. The sentiment of religion is indeed less easily aroused than many other of the more superficial sentiments, but when you once penetrate the overlying mass of sin and worldliness by which it is now covered up, you reach the main-spring of a man's existence, and, if there be faith and trust, you may lead him whithersoever you will. To every chivalrous sentiment and every emotion of patriotism and honor I desire to do full justice. Would that these noble qualities were more general. But however wide spread they might be they can never take the place of the higher inspirations. If we reflect for a moment, I think we shall feel convinced of this, and that we shall see that the sentiment of honor does not create courage, but simply sustains it where it may already exist; while Religion, on the contrary, actually *creates courage*, and

nerves the weakest with a spirit that will quail before no danger. What is death, especially if it be a glorious death, to one who sees before him a crown of eternal happiness. His courage then rises on the wings of his faith, and fearless of the result, he goes forth with his naked sword, ready to give "glorious chase" to the guilty and to the enemy of mankind through all the world. Religion therefore does not unfit men for the public service; on the contrary, it inspires them with all those valuable dispositions and sentiments that the true soldier could desire.

I may be permitted here to glance at the view sometimes set forth, that the profession of arms is inconsistent with the Christian character. It has even been declared that no genuine Christian can for one hour bear a sword without being untrue to his Master. This conclusion, however, I need not say is founded on a very narrow view of human nature and the constitution of society. War is certainly a terrible evil, and there is nothing in bloodshed, *per se*, to recommend it in the eyes of mankind. It is also true that we should always seek to settle our national as well as our private difficulties upon the principles of peace, and, so far as it lieth in us, to be on amicable relations with all men. We may also hope and pray for the time when wars and fighting shall cease altogether; but till some such happy period arrives, we must recognize physical force as one means of the public safety. Possibly there may be a time yet to come, when the golden age shall return and innocence reign in every bosom, so that the dreadful ap-

peal to arms shall be unnecessary. The same result might also be achieved by such improvements in the enginery of war as would make one man equal to ten thousand, and thus leave us the alternative of universal peace, or universal destruction. Till then, or till some new dispensation is inaugurated, we must sometimes resort to violence. It is idle to say that war is opposed to the genius of Christianity. At a single touch of the Master's wand, the theory of universal peace, a beautiful bubble—born of the foam of a false philanthropy—dissolves like magic. "The son of man came, not to bring peace, but a sword." If any man thinks that his religion is so pure that he cannot bear a sword tempered with mercy and pointed with divine justice, that man's religion is vain. One of the most sainted minds could say, "Blessed be the Lord my strength, who teacheth my hands to war and my fingers to fight."

I have thus touched upon these points to show you that when I recommend, as I have done at this time, the higher duties which you owe to yourselves and to God, that I urge nothing inconsistent with your present calling as Soldiers. I would therefore press upon you those divine obligations to-day, which, if faithfully performed, will shed a halo of beauty around the entire character. I know the disposition which prevails here, to adjourn these claims to some distant, and, as most men think, more convenient season. I know also the conviction of some minds that it is useless here in camp to contend with sin. I know also the weakness and the folly of such excuses for spiritual neglect. Let me therefore say that now

is the accepted time and now the day of salvation. Life is wasting rapidly away, and opportunities are passing never to return. Be persuaded that there are higher aims than any of those of earth, and brighter crowns than any that are found below. As lofty as may be the Patriot's aim, it is bounded by the grave ; but the hope of the Christian rests upon that unseen and eternal world — in expectation of which we are pilgrims and strangers below. Let us not give way to the opinion that the service of our country calls us away from the service of God. Let us not see in every bad suggestion an obstacle in the way of our religious progress. Let us rather convert these seeming impediments into the means of advancement. Let us spiritualize the conflict in which we are engaged. When you draw the sword or shoulder the musket for the duties of the day, seek at the same time to be arrayed with those invisible weapons not made with hands, but which are forged in the armory of heaven. Let every influence and every association that clusters around our glorious flag be hallowed by religion. See in its ample folds the covenant of our great King and mighty God. See in its white, the spotless Righteousness of the Redeemer ; in the red, that blood shed for sinners from the foundation of the world ; and in its beauteous stars, glittering in the field of azure, see an emblem of that ransomed and purified throng who shall shine as stars in the kingdom of glory forever and ever.

Let us remember, too, that the hopes and prayers of a multitude of loved ones at home are centered upon us here, and that any failure apparent in our bearing

will be keenly regretted. There are those interceding for us to-day, at the throne of Grace, who would rather hear that the object of their regard had fallen on the field of battle, than to learn that he had departed from his integrity and fidelity, from his virtue and his manhood. Be true therefore to the expectations of the loved ones at home, to our kind friends, to the public trust, to the voice of conscience and to God. Let us remember the example of the illustrious Washington, who was not ashamed to confess Christ and to bow humbly before the mysteries of faith, and accept Christ as all in all. Be not deceived with a vain philosophy, nor led by a paltry and insufficient ambition. Covet earnestly the best gifts. Choose the noblest paths and the loftiest aim, and God will show you that more excellent way, which, whether it may lead through the walks of peace or through the din of battle, will prove as the path of the just which shineth more and more unto the perfect day.



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